

FWP eyes state land for bison

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Posted: Wednesday, January 5, 2011 12:15 am; Updated: 11:17 pm, Thu Jan 13, 2011.

By DANIEL PERSON, Chronicle Staff Writer

Montana's wildlife agency has named three swaths of state land as potential roaming ground for 100 wild bison now in quarantine at a 400-acre facility near Corwin Springs.

In a memo to its five-member commission, the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks identified the Spotted Dog, Marias River and Beartooth wildlife-management areas as state-owned properties where the state could place the bison temporarily as it develops a long-term plan for wild bison in Montana.

The bison are part of an experiment to see if quarantine can be used to create herds of disease-free bison that share the genetic makeup of the bison now roaming Yellowstone National Park. As part of the 6-year-old project, bison were captured as they left the park, and those found not to have been exposed to brucellosis were kept in the Corwin Springs holding facility.

FWP identifying state land where the bison could be placed is a significant change from last year, when the state struck a deal with Turner Enterprises to place 86 Yellowstone bison on Ted Turner's Green Ranch west of Bozeman. That deal was controversial because it allows Turner Enterprises to keep up to 75 percent of the bison's offspring, but FWP argued it was necessary because it could not find any public or private groups -- including itself -- prepared to manage a herd of wild bison.

"As the state agency responsible for Montana's wildlife, it is time that we take a serious look at this big game species' management," FWP director Joe Maurier said in a written statement Monday. "Bison have been ignored as a big game species for 100 years. It's simply time to consider realistic options for its management in Montana."

According to the staff memo, approximately 50 bison must be moved from the Corwin Springs facility each year over the next two years.

FWP is asking the commission to endorse its plan to further explore those wildlife-management areas, as well as other unspecified sites, as "interim holding locations" for the bison now being held at the Corwin Springs facility. The commission will take up the proposal Monday in Helena.

No exact timeline has been developed for moving the bison. In a press release, FWP said "the goal would be to find appropriate areas that could support a huntable population of at least 50 bison." The bison will likely be confined by a fence.

"I doubt that we'll ever get to a truly free-ranging bison herd," Maurier said. "But we want to see if we can find the right place where bison can roam behind a wildlife-friendly fence."

Reaction to that plan was mixed Monday.

Mike Leahy, Rocky Mountain director of Defenders of Wildlife, said he was supportive of the move to consider wildlife-management areas for bison.

"We think it makes a lot of sense to relocate some of the bison to state lands," he said.

But Buffalo Field Campaign spokeswoman Stephany Seay was more critical.

"FWP's plan would further the disrespectful livestock model while adding the sickening twist of hunting buffalo on fenced-in public land after they have been raised in prison since they were calves stolen from the wild," she said.

Several lawmakers hope to address relocating bison during this legislative session, including bills that would ban free-roaming bison in Montana and give county commissioners oversight of bison placed in their counties.

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Yellowstone bison head toward public lands

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Posted Thursday, January 20, 2011 12:15 am: Updated: 9:58 pm, Wed Jan 19, 2011.

By CARLY FLANDRO, Chronicle Staff Writer

Like they've done for many winters, horseback riders on Wednesday herded a string of wild bison across a frozen, white landscape just outside of Yellowstone National Park.

But this time, the bison were being herded out of the park rather than into it — marking the first time in decades that the wild animals will be allowed to winter on public lands north of the park.

Agency officials are touting the move as a step toward increased tolerance of bison outside the park, and noted that — for the first time — the bison will be allowed in an area that still hosts a small number of cattle year-round.

Historically, the bison have been confined to the park for fear that the animals will spread brucellosis to livestock that graze on private ranches and public land around Yellowstone. Brucellosis causes wildlife and livestock to abort their young.

The 25 bison were spirited Wednesday as they were released from a fenced pasture at the Stephens Creek facility northwest of Gardiner. A handful of horseback riders trailed behind them, hazing the bison about a half dozen miles north to the Royal Teton Ranch.

The bison trotted in a procession alongside the Yellowstone River and through Royal Teton Ranch property, which is serving as a corridor between the park and the Gallatin National Forest.

The ranchland is owned by the Church Universal and Triumphant. Government agencies and the church struck a \$3.3 million deal in 2008, securing use of the land in a 30-year grazing lease.

Adjacent to the ranchland, the open, snow-blanketed Cutler Meadow spread from the base of nearby foothills and mountains. That, according to Mel Frost of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, is where the agencies are hoping the bison will flock to and forage for the next several months. The meadow is part of the Gallatin National Forest.

Horseback riders stopped short of herding the bison there on Wednesday, however. Marna Daley, spokeswoman for the Gallatin National Forest, said that may have been because the animals were tired, or because they were close enough to the meadow to wander there without prompting.

However, if the bison attempt to continue past the meadow and roam through Yankee Jim Canyon toward Paradise Valley, they would have to be stopped, according to agency officials. In that case, the bison would either be hazed, captured, or "lethally removed."

If the animals move west, they could roam as far as the National Forest extends.

This step is part of the Interagency Bison Management Plan, under which five agencies cooperate in the hopes of conserving a wild, free-ranging bison population while allowing livestock grazing to continue around Yellowstone.

Every week, representatives from those agencies will monitor the bison, mostly to see where they're moving and how they're using the landscape, according to Al Nash, a spokesman for the park.

But the bison won't be calling the meadow home for too long. The animals must return to the park by May 1, according to Frost. It's possible that they could return on their own, she said, but if not they would likely be hazed back into the park.

Bison tend to exit the park in the winter season in search for lower ground and better places to forage, Frost said. The Cutler Meadow area could provide some of the winter habitat the bison seek on a longer-term basis if all goes well.

Next year, the amount of bison on the land could increase to 50. And the following year, as many as 100 bison could be allowed to winter north of the park.

The initial group of 25, which includes seven calves, 18 adults, and a mixture of males and females, was chosen after corralling dozens into the Stephens Creek pasture. The animals were tested for exposure to brucellosis, and those that tested negative became eligible.

Officials then monitored those animals to choose which to include in the final group, striving, for example, to keep together calves and cows.

Agency officials and members of the public gathered to watch the bison run from the fenced pasture Wednesday morning, and stood quietly when the animals finally came into view, running ahead of the horses and riders.

After they had passed, Stephany Seay, a spokeswoman for the Buffalo Field Campaign, a nonprofit bison advocacy group, said it was depressing to see the animals "treated as livestock."

"It's a sad day for us," she said. "We do not celebrate this."

The Buffalo Field Campaign is opposed to the way the animals are being treated, including capturing, collaring and blood testing. Seay said that treatment infringes upon the animals' "wild integrity."

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Reference Links

- Map: Gallatin National Forest
- Wikipedia: Gallatin National Forest
- Wikipedia: Church Universal and Triumphant
- Wikipedia: Paradise Valley (Montana)
- Wikipedia: Bison

Half of newly moved bison move across Yellowstone River

By BRETT FRENCH Of The Gazette Staff | Posted: Friday, January 21, 2011 11:15 am

GARDINER — Roughly half of the Yellowstone National Park bison that were hazed Wednesday onto national forest land as a test of increasing tolerance for disease-free bison crossed the Yellowstone River on Thursday — outside the area they were meant to roam.

Montana Department of Livestock staff tried to move the animals back Thursday night but ran out of daylight. By the time they returned Friday morning to resume the hazing effort, the animals had returned back across the river, said Al Nash, chief of public affairs for Yellowstone. But by later in the afternoon, a group of bison had again crossed the river and hazers were dispatched to push them across the river.

"What I've said all along is the bison are going to learn the landscape and we're going to learn how they use the landscape," Nash said.

Prior to being moved Wednesday, the bison had migrated out of Yellowstone and were being held at the park's Stephens Creek corrals to be tested for brucellosis. Once 25 disease-free bison were captured, they were fitted with GPS tracking collars, ear tagged and females had intrauterine tracking devices implanted.

The bison's escape from their new allotment will give foes of the program more fodder for denying bison access to public lands outside of Yellowstone. But Nash remained resolute.

"It's too early to pass judgment on the level of success this experiment may have," he said.

Bison have not been tolerated beyond the park's northern border except in the Eagle Creek area, east of the Yellowstone River, where hunting is allowed. In past years, bison that wandered out of the park west of the river have been hazed back into the park or corralled. Corralled bison are tested for exposure to brucellosis, a disease that can cause cows to abort their pregnancies. Bison that tested positive for the disease were slaughtered and the meat given to tribes and food banks.

The mixed group of bison that were moved Wednesday were supposed to stay on 2,500 acres of Gallatin National Forest land. The bison were hazed through an easement for which conservation groups paid \$3 million to the Church Universal and Triumphant for a 30-year lease to its Royal Teton Ranch. The Yellowstone River acts as the eastern boundary of the area where the bison were allowed.

Nash said a contingent of bison swam the river on Wednesday when they were moved by Livestock Department riders, but swam back. The bison that crossed on Thursday moved near where a herd of disease-free quarantined bison are being held for possible relocation to public lands in Montana and then later crossed near an old Fish, Wildlife and Parks game check station.

Nash said the Park Service will decide next week what to do with the 63 bison still being held at the Stephens Creek corrals. Twenty-one of the bison have tested positive for exposure to brucellosis, 19 tested negative and the other 23 have not been tested.



The Fort Belknap Indian Reservation owns a herd of 450 bison. Two hundred escaped and were rounded up with snowmobiles Thursday.

► Fort Belknap Reservation

Roaming bison worrying tribe's ranch neighbors

By KARL PUCKETT
Tribune Staff Writer

Snowmobile-riding wranglers returned an escaped herd of 200 bison back to pasture on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation on Thursday.

It was the most recent of several bison breaks this winter by members of the tribe's herd of 450, with bison scaling deep snow and large drifts along 40 miles of fence line to roam free.

The repeated escapes have neighboring cattle ranchers worried about losing scarce supplies of hay during a particularly tough winter, Blaine County Attorney Don Ranstrom said.

Livestock producers also are concerned about fences being damaged and the spread of brucellosis, a disease that can cause female animals to abort.

"They're so big I refer to them as a woolly tank because they can walk through a fence without knowing it's there," Ranstrom said.

Male bison can weigh up to 2 tons and stand 6 feet tall, according to the National Wildlife Federation.

Buffalo bill

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Snowbound reservation

The Fort Belknap Commission ordered emergency use

Bison: 'We don't want them out roaming'

FROM 1A

Thursday morning, the escaped 200 bison were spotted in the vicinity of Barney Olson Road, a north-south gravel road south of Chinook in Blaine County.

That's several miles west of the reservation.

"We don't want them out roaming on other people's property," said Mike Fox, a tribal council member who oversees the tribe's natural resources and law enforcement departments. "We're doing what we can with what we've got to keep 'em in."

Two snowmobile wranglers pushed the herd back to the pasture late Thursday afternoon. One machine broke down on the trail, leaving one driver to finish the job.

Saying the escapes are becoming a regular occurrence, Blaine County officials contacted the U.S. Attorney's Office and the Montana Attorney General's Office to inquire if the county has the authority to impound the animals or request funds from the tribe to pay for any damages.

That's the first time the county has taken that step, Sheriff Glenn Huestis said. With the tribe being a sovereign nation, county officials said they don't know what legal standing they have.

"We're casting about to see if we could perhaps locate some assistance through one of those offices to obtain some sort of

remedy for these folks," Ransstrom said.

Jessica Fehr, public information officer for the U.S. Attorney's Office, said the office's position is "we hope the parties can arrive at some sort of quick resolution." The office has no plans to get involved, she said.

Judy Beck, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Justice, said a staff attorney spoke with Blaine County officials, but received no formal question or request for assistance.

Bison have been a contentious issue among ranchers and the tribe.

The tribe keeps 450 animals on 22,000 acres, which have 40 miles of 6-foot-tall barbed-wire fence around them. It also runs Little Rockies Meat Packing Co., where bison are butchered, and a smokehouse for making jerky.

The Montana Department of Livestock said a rancher shot five bison in 2004 after they crossed onto his land adjacent to the reservation.

In the most recent escape, Fox said he was aware of one instance in which the bison ate hay on private property. That landowner will be compensated, he said.

The bison are brucellosis-free, Fox added.

Last week, Fox testified before the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission that the tribe is interested in acquiring more bison. FWP is studying relocating wild bison from the Yellowstone National Park area to different

locations in the state, a controversial idea in the ranching community.

Fox said he is concerned the escape from the pasture will influence the decision-makers.

"But it's kind of an unprecedented winter with this much snow," he said. "We realize we need a different management approach."

In the past, bison were allowed to roam in the pasture in the winter. That worked well when there wasn't much snow on the ground. But more snow has fallen in the past couple of winters, which has allowed bison to climb out of the pasture.

The tribe is looking into building a smaller winter pasture on flat ground so the bison can't get out even when the snow is deep, Fox said.

Ruben Horseman, a tribal member who lives 7 miles from the buffalo pasture, said some residents don't want more bison.

"We can't manage what we have," Horseman said. "We don't have the feed, and we don't have the resources."

On Thursday, crews plowed the road leading to the bison pasture, Fox said.

With the road now open, the tribe can put down hay for the hungry animals and also work on

20 areas where snow drifted over the fence, Fox said. Previously, tribal employees could only reach the bison by snowmobile, he said.

Bison have escaped three or four times this month, Fox said.

Huestis said members of his office flew over a 20-mile stretch of the western edge of the reservation Wednesday after hearing reports that bison had escaped from the pasture. Nine buffalo were spotted outside the reservation. The report of 200 bison being loose came Thursday.

The tribe and the county have an agreement in which county authorities immediately call tribal officials when escaped bison are reported. The tribe then dispatches the wranglers. Huestis said the tribe has responded well in the past, but the continued escapes concern the county, he said.

In the past, bison have escaped and damaged idle land in the Conservation Reserve Program, causing CRP payments to be withheld from some ranchers, Huestis said.

"It (the escaping bison) is an ongoing yearly situation that keeps coming up this time every year," he said.

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Montana livestock agents kill 1 bison north of Yellowstone

By MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press | Posted: Monday, January 24, 2011 8:00 pm

BILLINGS - One of 25 bison allowed to roam north of Yellowstone National Park was shot by Montana livestock agents Monday - a setback to efforts to allow bison onto grazing grounds where they had been barred for decades.

Department of Livestock spokesman Steve Merritt said agency personnel killed the cow Monday after trying for two days to haze it off private property and onto the Gallatin National Forest.

Government agencies and private groups have committed to spend more than \$3 million to establish a corridor through private land for some bison to leave Yellowstone during the winter migrations. More than 3,000 bison were captured and slaughtered attempting the journey in the last decade.

Wildlife officials want the 25 bison to stay on a 2,500-acre patch of forestland along the west bank of the Yellowstone River. But the animals have repeatedly wandered off since their Wednesday arrival, by crossing the river into inhabited areas several miles north of the park.

Many bison carry brucellosis, which can cause animals to prematurely abort their young. The disease was brought the region in the livestock of early European settlers, but after being eradicated from cattle nationwide persists in Yellowstone's wildlife.

The 25 involved in the experimental habitat program tested negative for exposure to brucellosis, although ranchers in the region remain wary.

Officials said a second animal, a bull bison, remained unaccounted for Monday.

Merritt said it was uncertain what would happen to that animal if it is found. Yet Monday's events made clear that the Department of Livestock tolerance for bison in Montana has its limits.

"We just didn't know what to expect once the bison got up there," Merritt said. "If they don't cooperate, we will be forced into some sort of management decision."

A representative of the Buffalo Field Campaign, a bison advocacy group, said state and federal officials should have foreseen the animals would not stay on the Gallatin forest.

"Buffalo move no matter where you put them," said Peter Bogusko, an activist with the group. "I don't know why they assumed they weren't going to cross the Yellowstone."

Representatives of the five state and federal agencies involved in moving the bison onto the Gallatin were scheduled to have a conference call Tuesday to discuss the fate of the animals.

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks regional director Pat Flowers said if some or all of the animals continue to enter private property they could be hazed yet again onto the forest, pushed back into Yellowstone or, as a last resort, lethally removed.

Flowers said it was a "reasonable possibility" that repeated hazings of the animals will prod the bison to give up their efforts to roam.

"Animals respond to pressure. Whether it's an unpleasant disturbance from people on horseback or hunting pressure, they respond to that pressure," he said. "From the outset, we had described this effort as a process where we're going to learn how the bison will behave once they get up there."

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GREAT FALLS, MONTANA

Yellowstone bison may be fed to keep them in place

The Associated Press • January 26, 2011

BOZEMAN — Montana wildlife officials are considering feeding two dozen wild bison to keep them from wandering off a newly designated grazing area on the Gallatin National Forest.

Mel Frost with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks said state law allows for supplemental feeding of the animals for "disease control purposes."

The Yellowstone National Park bison were relocated to 2,500 acres north of the park last week under a pilot program to expand bison habitat. Because of fears over a disease carried by bison, one of the animals was shot by state livestock agents Monday when it wandered onto private property.

Officials had tried unsuccessfully to haze the animal back onto public land. They say feeding the remaining bison might keep them in place.

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Livingston teen hits bison with pickup truck

Originally printed at <http://www.kulr8.com/news/state/116199779.html>

February 15, 2011

LIVINGSTON, Mont. (AP) — A teenage driver who came upon two bison on U.S. Highway 89 was able to swerve and miss one of the animals, but hit the second, damaging the pickup. The bison that was struck had to be put down due to its injuries.

Montana Highway Patrol Trooper Shawn Fowler told the Livingston Enterprise the crash happened at about 9:15 p.m. Saturday. The teen was following the speed limit and driving about 65 mph.

Park County dispatch records indicated the teen and his younger brother did not have any injuries requiring emergency medical attention.

Fowler says collisions with bison occur "very rarely." He says Saturday's was the first one he's seen in his five years working in the Livingston area.

Information from: Livingston Enterprise, <http://www.livingstonenterprise.com>

Jeep destroyed after crashing into bison

By Camden Easterling, Livingston Enterprise Staff Writer

A driver suffered minor injuries after a collision with a bison on U.S. Highway 89 South Thursday night.

While the Montana Highway Patrol says such crashes in this area are rare, Thursday's accident is the second bison-versus-vehicle incident in less than a month.

The driver, a 29-year-old Bozeman man, was northbound about 11 miles north of Gardiner when he came upon a group of four bison in the roadway, MHP Trooper Matt Nilan said Monday.

"He braked and swerved to avoid one and hit another," Nilan said.

The man's Jeep Cherokee, which had been traveling at a speed below the 65-mph limit, was destroyed.

"The buffalo's head actually came through the windshield," the trooper said.

The driver and his passenger, though, were wearing seat belts and were lucky to have not been seriously injured, Nilan said.

The driver went to Livingston Memorial Hospital for minor injuries to his hands, the trooper said. An LMH spokeswoman on Tuesday said the driver was treated and released the day of the accident.

Emergency responders closed the southbound lane for about an hour as they cleaned up the scene, including moving the bison off the roadway using a front-end loader. Responding agencies were MHP, Paradise Valley Fire Department, the Park County Sheriff's Office and Park County Rural Fire District No. 1.

Troopers say that though bison on the roadway can be hard to see in the dark, collisions with them are infrequent.

"It's rare," Nilan said, adding that he can't recall responding to any similar incidents in the last few years.

However, a teenage boy struck a bison in mid-February when he was driving just a few miles north of Gardiner on 89 South. The driver did not have any

injuries that required emergency medical attention. His vehicle, a pickup truck fitted with a grill guard, was not drivable after the crash but was not totaled, a trooper who responded to the crash said at the time.